

Amos French: Chickasaws, troops, wolves and ‘Old Hickory’ couldn’t keep him down

By Rebekah Davis

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It’s one of those names that incessantly pops up in the Archives records, on maps, in deeds, in commission minutes, from the earliest records of Limestone County to the Google directions to the pizza place: French.

But who were these Frenches that contributed so much to the shaping of the county, and where did they come from?

It all started with Benjamin French, a Virginia native and Revolutionary War veteran who arrived in Limestone County in 1808. He settled on Limestone Creek about nine miles east of present-day Athens – illegally, because the area was still protected as Chickasaw territory until 1818. Around 1830 he decided to move “over Elk” and built this house in the Lentzville area, just west of present-day Elk Estates.

Benjamin must have had quite a crowd in this log cabin, considering that he brought 11 children to Limestone County: Jerry, Jessie, Samuel, Benjamin, Milly, Jane, Ann, Polly, Sallie, Frances and Amos. Before he died in 1840, Benjamin moved to Rogersville, but many of his family remained in Limestone County.

Stories abound about the Frenches, including Elisha French, who built his mill east of Athens on what was then known as Meat House Branch. Because of his influence, the creek name was changed to French Mill Creek, and the area around the intersection of Highway 72 and Mooresville Road is still called French’s Mill.

However, one of the most colorful characters in the French family was Benjamin’s son and Elisha’s dad, “Uncle Amos” French. He brought his new bride, Elizabeth, to Limestone County when he came here with his father as a squatter on the land in 1808, and he paid the price for being here illegally.

R.A. McClellan’s *Early History of Limestone County* tells the story of how French narrowly escaped the U.S. soldiers who were charged with the task of keeping white settlers out of Chickasaw land:

“In about 1810 one of the Indians, who had shared his hospitality, came to him in a ‘little new ground’ in which he was at work, and in bad English, made him understand that evil was impending and he left as quickly as he could. Before he had gotten out of sight, however, he saw the smoke arising from his cabins on fire.”

It would take more than a band of soldiers to keep Uncle Amos out of Limestone County, though. He let the fires die down – literally – and then came right back to Limestone County to build his home again. When the county opened up to settlement in 1818, he was one of the first to buy property, building his home on Nick Davis Road. His daughter Polly later told McClellan that the first night they stayed at that place “the wolves annoyed them greatly.”

Uncle Amos may have met his match, however, in “Old Hickory.” Just before the battle of New Orleans in 1815, Amos was drinking a cup of coffee when Andrew Jackson knocked it out of his hand with his sword. McClellan says the act was never forgiven. “Years afterwards all this family were ardent Whigs, great admirers of Henry Clay and believed to the last that ‘Old Hickory’ was a tyrant,” McClellan says.

In the end, Uncle Amos got the best of them all, living to see his own 11 children settled and successful throughout the threats of Chickasaws, Union soldiers, wolves, tyrants and even a war between the states. He died at 88 years old on the Fourth of July, 1869.

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